‘On some precipice in a dream’:
Representations of Guilt in Contemporary Young Adult Gay and Lesbian Fiction

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This article explores the representation of guilt in six recent young adult novels, in which it is suggested that teen protagonists still experience guilt in relation to their emerging non-normative sexual identities. The experience of guilt may take several different forms, but all dealt with here are characterised by guilt without agency – that is, the protagonist has not deliberately said or done anything to cause harm to another. In a first pair of novels, guilt is depicted as a consequence of internalised homophobia, with which protagonists must at least partly identify. In a second group, protagonists seem to experience a form of separation guilt from an early age because they fail to conform to the norms of the family. Certain events external to the teen protagonist, and for which they cannot be held responsible, then trigger serious depressive episodes, which jeopardise the protagonist’s positive identity development. Finally, characters are depicted as experiencing a form of survivor guilt. A gay protagonist survives the events of 9/11 but endures a breakdown, and, in a second novel, a lesbian protagonist narrates her coming to terms with the death of her best friend.

Key words: Young adult fiction, guilt, gay and lesbian, homophobia, selfhood

In contemporary young adult fiction which thematises gay and lesbian subjectivities, many adolescent lesbian and gay characters are depicted as experiencing feelings of guilt. Homophobia and heterosexism are concepts centrally implicated in these guilty feelings, and both are found at the societal and individual level. This article explores some of the various consequences of internalised homophobia, anti-gay prejudice and discrimination represented as the experience of young adult gay or lesbian characters. The six novels selected for discussion here all thematise their protagonists’ individual experiences of guilt to demonstrate how prolonged guilty feelings and negative feelings about the self can seriously jeopardise a young adult’s individual identity development. All the

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texts affirm that same-sex desire is not a choice to be controlled by the individual character, and therefore the implication is that characters cannot change their sexual orientation even if they wanted to. The apparent objective of the novels is to create reader empathy for and acceptance of the YA protagonists concerned, and to reinforce the need for social support, particularly from parents and peers, by showing how it makes such a crucial difference in the individual experience of the teen lesbian and gay character.

Characters are represented as feeling compelled at the outset of the novels to hide their sexual orientation from others, or as struggling in relation to their emerging sexual identity. He or she is depicted as initially resisting the desire for someone of the same sex. Guilt can be thought of as a person’s sense or awareness that he or she has done something wrong or finds himself or herself in the wrong. It is often an internal critical voice that remains long after the event or act that has caused guilty feelings to arise in the first place. In the young adult novels considered here, the gay or lesbian protagonist is not responsible for a wrongdoing. Paradoxically, the internal critical voice can also be thought of as a person’s conscience, and suggests the character’s moral integrity and empathy for others. Guilt can be differentiated from shame, which is also a sense of wrongdoing, but where the individual feels the emotion in relation to the gaze of others. Historically, shame was more closely associated with the group, whereas a more modern sense of guilt is tied to the individual. Guilt generally focuses our attention on the victim, creating compassion for the suffering of others, particularly where there is a responsibility or culpability in relation to that suffering. In certain instances, the critical voice is internalised in such a way that it becomes pathological. In this context, guilt may lead to a form of masochistic self-punishment as a form of reparation, or a readiness to submit to punishment from others.

GUILT AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

The very real human need for approval from significant others, and particularly a child’s need for parental approval, is represented in the texts considered here as so fundamental that even possible threats to social and emotional bonds generate a range of unpleasant physical and emotional responses. Baumeister and Leary (1992: 497) suggest that the need to belong precedes the need for esteem and self-actualisation, and is second only to basic survival needs such as food, water and shelter. Emotions such as guilt have evolved to signal the possible threat of social exclusion, but also as a way of driving us to take responsibility for our actions, inaction or intentions. The emotion functions positively then to motivate reparative behaviour or atonement. Guilt may work to enhance or repair relationships and thus may work positively to build the social fabric. It exists as a result of human relationships and in part to protect those relationships and ensure that they are long-lasting. However, it is difficult to see exactly how gay or lesbian protagonists who feel guilty are supposed to ‘make amends’ for
their sexual orientation, because the concept of individual control and choice is a contradiction in the context of same-sex desire, which is generally experienced as beyond the character’s control.

This article focuses on emotional guilt and guilty feelings, as well as the subjective experience of personal responsibility and self-blame. Guilt, or guilty feelings, can be described as an aroused form of distress or an unpleasant arousal similar to anxiety, and distinct from the feeling of anger or fear of punishment, both of which are also negative emotions (Baumeister et al, 1994: 245). Ortony (1987: 288) has defined two specific categories of guilt, one of which he characterises as ‘sociolegal’ guilt and the other as ‘emotional guilt’. A third category is ‘sex guilt’ (Tangney, 1990: 103), which many consider to be more accurately termed ‘sex shame’. Recent research suggests that the ‘capacity for guilt is innate and universal; [only] its modes of expression are culturally learned’ (Zahn-Waxler and Kochanska, 1990: 232). Guilt is usually triggered by feeling empathic distress for another person’s suffering in combination with a ‘self-attribution of causal responsibility for the other’s suffering’ (Baumeister et al, 1994: 246, after Hoffman, 1982). There may be no actual intention to cause suffering or harm, but one can still see how the other suffers as a consequence of one’s own self. Empathy with another’s suffering is more likely to be felt and felt more acutely when the relationship is significant and close.

Even the category of ‘emotional guilt’ can be finely divided into a large number of different subcategories, but of particular relevance here is ‘guilt without agency’ (Patricia Greenspan, 1992: 295). Grounds for guilt are separated from grounds for blame, and the character depicted as experiencing guilt is usually simultaneously depicted as ‘blameless’ or ‘innocent’, as he or she has not done anything wrong or caused any harm to another. In the young adult texts considered here, characters experience a number of different forms of ‘guilt without agency’, and the character is depicted as suffering as a consequence of that guilt. As has been demonstrated earlier, guilt may have many positive social functions, particularly when it causes someone to repair a relationship or make amends for a perceived wrongdoing. But here the character’s guilt does not lead to any wider social benefit, and the individual subject’s early experience of guilt is highly negative in relation to his or her identity development and formation. Characters, who are already feeling guilty, are depicted as more likely to experience other forms of guilt, including ‘internalised homophobia’, which can also be characterised as ‘self-hate guilt’, ‘separation guilt’, ‘omnipotent responsibility guilt’, and, in the last section of the article, ‘survivor guilt’. In short, the gay and lesbian protagonists considered here are represented as ‘guilt-prone’.

GUilt IN CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT TEXTS

Broadly speaking, I take a psychological approach here to the theme of guilt, and consider a group of young adult texts: Bill Konigsberg’s Out of the Pocket (2008), Leanne Lieberman’s Gravity (2008), Nick Burd’s The Vast Fields of Ordinary (2009),
Joanne Horniman’s *About a Girl* (2010), Peter Cameron’s *Someday this pain will be useful to you* (2007) and Emily Horner’s *A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend* (2010). The texts selected for commentary have been published within the last five years and come from three English-speaking countries, that is, Australia, Canada and the United States. Together they suggest a range of recent young adult gay and lesbian fictional subjectivities written in English, by which I do not wish to imply that guilt is similarly portrayed in other cultures. Equally, there are many recent texts with gay and lesbian protagonists which do not foreground the experience of guilt, and many texts published within the last decade are significantly more progressive in their representation of gay and lesbian subjectivities. However, as this article takes the phenomenon of guilt as its focus, I foreground here what makes gay and lesbian characters in these selected novels feel guilty and how that feeling – or the wish to avoid that feeling – prompts individual characters to act in certain ways. By each novel’s conclusion, the teen protagonist has processed his or her guilty feelings and arrived at a place of self-acceptance, that is, beyond guilt.

**INTERNALISED HOMOPHOBIA AS GUILT**

The first pair of texts depicts young adult protagonists struggling with internalised homophobia, that is, an internalisation of social disapproval and negative views of same-sex desire, which are experienced as guilt and self-loathing. Characters are shown to be particularly vulnerable to homophobia during their formative years when their sexuality is in the process of emerging. The characters’ perception that they will not be accepted and will not belong if they disclose their sexual orientation is often shown to be rational and justified. The sense of having done something wrong is confirmed by other characters’ reactions to the protagonist’s disclosure of his or her sexual orientation because heteronormativity is so frequently assumed. Bobby and Ellie, adolescent gay and lesbian protagonists of, respectively, Bill Konigsberg’s *Out of the Pocket* and Leanne Lieberman’s *Gravity*, have loving families. However, the characters’ own internalised homophobia, with which they must at least partly identify, is a source of guilt and shame, made manifest in the adolescent body. Social disapproval of deviation from social norms, especially in such a fundamental area of human experience, frequently leads to highly negative views of the self and a perceived abnormal identity, most commonly experienced as guilt and a sense of shame. The level of guilt present in each character may vary, but the dominant emotion remains the same. Bobby is an outstanding athlete and Ellie a highly academic student, but their abilities do not override their shared sense of guilt and shame.

Guilt is represented in this pair of texts as a physical experience, expressed through the body, as well as an emotional one. Freud (1909/1955, cited in Tangney, Wagner, and Gramzow, 1992: 476) emphasised the self-punitive aspects of guilt, and the individual belief that the core self, rather than a particular behaviour, is ‘malignant’ and negative and must be punished. A character feels
guilt simply for the person he or she is. In these instances, guilt becomes a highly
negative emotion, almost pathological and masochistic in nature, rather than
leading to greater compassion for others or stronger social bonds. Such self-
destructive guilt characterises Out of the Pocket, and is foregrounded because the
novel is narrated in the first person by seventeen-year-old Bobby Framingham.
Bobby has many reasons to feel good about himself. He is a talented high
school football player and his team’s captain. He is socially popular and much
in demand with several of the cheerleading girls. But as the narrative develops,
physical manifestations of his guilt become increasingly prominent. Bobby’s sense
of awkwardness turns into high levels of guilt over feelings of same-sex attraction,
even though these are entirely speculative for most of the novel.

Bobby’s dreams, thoughts and fantasies make him feel intensely
uncomfortable. His fundamental sense of guilt seems to derive from his fear of
being rejected for his gay sexuality. The character foregrounds several aspects of
his experience which cause him to feel awkward and ashamed. When Bobby is
outed in a school newspaper article, events overtake him. His best friend Carrie
discovers his sexuality and he has to face her disappointment, since she has after
all liked him ‘like that’. When she confronts him, his guilt initially appears in his
voice, and his sense of being overwhelmed increases until he passes out in front
of the crowd. Later, under yet more pressure, in part generated by his father’s
ill-health, Bobby has a full physical breakdown during the middle of a significant
football game: ‘I pictured my arm flailing in the wind. I can’t even control my own body
(199)’. His lack of control over his arm is symbolic of his lack of control in relation
to his desires. He feels guilty for not being able to make his body do the ‘right
thing’, but the text suggests that he cannot be culpable for something beyond his
control. Towards the novel’s conclusion, and with the support of his family and
friends, Bobby’s feelings of guilt have begun to dissipate and he is finally able to
enact his gay subjectivity in a relationship with a young sportswriter.

In Leanne Lieberman’s Gravity, fifteen-year-old protagonist Ellie Gold lives
in Toronto, Canada, with her Orthodox Jewish family. Her growing awareness
of the clash between her emerging lesbian identity and Orthodox Judaism makes
her feel intensely guilty and uncomfortable. Her own negative ideas about same-
sex desire combined with her religious beliefs mean that she is initially reluctant
to accept the way she feels about another girl. Ellie attends a traditional Jewish
school together with her older sister Neshama, and is generally perceived by
the family as the ‘good’ daughter in contrast with her more rebellious sister.
The novel opens at the beginning of the summer holidays, which Ellie spends
at her grandmother’s lakeside cottage, a few hours north of Toronto. Ellie’s
parents are away in Israel, and seventeen-year-old Neshama is at summer camp.
The narrative is focalised in the first person by Ellie, and conveys her genuine
commitment to Judaism, but at the lake, Ellie meets fellow teen Lindsay, and
over the summer, becomes aware of her desire for this very different girl.
Simultaneously, she experiences a strong sense of guilt in relation to her same-
sex desire. Back in Toronto, the girls continue to meet secretly at Lindsay’s house
after school.
Ellie’s internalised homophobia is, like Bobby’s, expressed through the body, as she consciously uses physical pain to distract her from thoughts that make her feel guilty. Kimberley Reynolds, in her discussion of young adult texts with self-harming female protagonists, points out the ways in which apparently self-destructive behaviours, including cutting oneself, can also be regarded by the person self-harming as a means of self-protection (2010: 88). Ellie engages in various compulsive behaviours such as biting the inside of her cheek until it bleeds or popping an elastic band against her wrist. Ellie punishes herself by pulling out a hair whenever she thinks of Lindsay, and ends up with a large ugly bald patch. In the process of trying to do the right thing, she finds comfort and perhaps a sense of stability in the pursuit of factual knowledge, such as memorising the Periodic Table and the Latin names for sea stars. Ironically, her academic interest in science develops rapidly, and, like her sexuality, also has to be accommodated with her religion. Towards the narrative conclusion, Ellie realises that Lindsay cannot be in love with her, and, although painful, she decides to end the relationship. Within the text, she never discloses her sexuality to her parents or her grandmother, but her sister does guess the nature of her relationship with Lindsay. With her sister’s support, Ellie arrives at a place of self-acceptance. She also changes school so that she can study science. The narrative conclusion simultaneously affirms her lesbian subjectivity, her academic interest in marine ecology and her religious beliefs.

SEPARATION GUILT

In the second pair of texts, young adult protagonists experience a profound and disabling sense of guilt that seems only indirectly related to their sexual orientation. The original source of the guilt is very likely to stem from the protagonist’s awareness of his or her sexual difference. But then it is as if negative views of the self combine with guilt triggered by events external to the character, which then result in serious depression. Patricia Greenspan, in *Subjective Guilt and Responsibility*, argues that a child might grow up to feel guilty about violating certain family norms. She suggests that someone may feel guilty for reasons that have nothing to do with the agent’s acts or even that do not directly involve the agent. One of Greenspan’s examples is a child who feels guilty about not being very bright or ambitious – not able to be successful in the way the child’s parents desired. ‘Intuitively speaking it seems possible, whether or not it is rational, to feel guilt, not just shame, about all sorts of uncontrollable inadequacies, inabilities, and traits of character or temperament discouraged by parents and others but extending as far back in one’s history as the claim to a distinct personality or self’ (296). Greenspan refers to this form of guilt as ‘guilt for what one is’ and her description of a child’s guilt seems to speak to the teen gay or lesbian character’s situation.

The character experiencing guilt from several different sources will no longer be positively motivated to act, but is more likely to be overwhelmed by
the emotion. Herbert Morris further elaborates a subcategory of guilt and guilt feelings (226–7), which also do not involve culpability but may involve feelings of responsibility. He refers to this particular form of guilt as ‘separation guilt’, which is based on being different from the members of a group such as family. The traumatic event or situation depicted as prompting the character’s personal crisis may be beyond his or her individual responsibility or control. With this type of guilt, there is no judgement of causal responsibility or blame for the situation concerned (Greenspan, 1992: 287). Paradoxically, a sense of guilt develops out of a sense of empathy, and is closely linked with emotional sensitivity. The young adult protagonists considered here are sensitive and empathic, and usually the most empathic children and adults are amongst the most popular. However, the individual experience of empathy and guilt here cannot be constructed as positive for the character, because the character experiences so much empathy, guilt and exaggerated feelings of responsibility as to seriously neglect his or her own individual interests. Burdened by guilty feelings for an extended period of time, the character’s positive identity development is genuinely jeopardised.

In Nick Burd’s *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*, eighteen-year-old protagonist Dade Hamilton feels guilty and depressed in relation to several characters in his life and somehow to blame for his parents’ unhappy marriage. Dade knows he is fundamentally different from his parents, and, in this context, experiences a form of what could be characterised as ‘separation or disloyalty guilt’. He narrates the last three months of living at home in suburban Iowa before leaving for college, a period during which Dade also experiences the trauma of the death of his former boyfriend, Pablo, who drives his car into a tree, and leaves Dade with an ongoing sense of responsibility for the fatal accident. Dade’s sense that he failed to prevent the fatal accident seems to linger with him. As Roberta Seelinger Trites argues in *Disturbing The Universe* (118), death is constructed as a key rite of passage in many texts aimed at young adults. Trites suggests that adolescent characters (and readers) learn about their own mortality by witnessing the death of someone who is not necessarily ill or old, but who may be from their own peer group and whose death is depicted as abrupt, random and unnecessary.

Once Dade has left home, he is able to stop feeling responsible for his mother’s unhappiness, his father’s affair and the guilt he feels in knowing about the affair whilst his mother remains ignorant of it. With a little geographical and emotional distance from his parents, his sense of guilt is alleviated, as he comes to realise that he bears no direct responsibility for his parents’ marriage, or, for that matter, Pablo’s fatal car accident. The nine-year-old girl, Jenny Moore, who had been missing all summer, turns up unharmed at the local supermarket where Dade had part-time work and her re-appearance seems to create a more hopeful and optimistic mood in Dade. Belatedly, he is able to arrive at a more objective understanding of his own individual role in events. When his parents finally decide to divorce, the decision has minimal impact on him, even though he has dreaded the possibility for a long time. ‘It was one of the most anticlimactic conversations I’ve ever had... I was vaguely worried about how they would cope with wandering the desert of adulthood without the other’s hand to hold, but
then I remembered that they never appeared to give each other much comfort in the first place’ (307). He now recognises that his parents bear the responsibility for their own relationship and are likely in fact to be happier without each other.

In Joanne Horniman’s *About a Girl*, Anna, at nineteen, reflects back on being sixteen and on the guilt she experienced in relation to her parents’ divorce. Like Dade, she feels guilt over a long period of time, and is also depicted as a highly sensitive and empathic character. Both novels are narrated in the first person, positioning readers to see and feel things from Dade and Anna’s perspectives, which are increasingly guilt-ridden and depressive before they are able to become more realistic and hopeful. Anna feels guilty for feeling different from her family in a way she cannot fully explain, and only later does it become clear that she feels her lesbian subjectivity sets her apart from them. After her parents’ divorce, she is burdened by her mother’s unhappiness and by her mother’s anxiety for Anna’s much younger sister Molly. Anna feels guilty for resenting her brain-damaged sister, although it is also undeniably the case that she has received less parental attention since Molly’s birth. Like Dade, it is only once Anna has left her family in Canberra and moved away to Lismore that she can see that she is not responsible for everyone else’s wellbeing. In Lismore, she is free to enact her own lesbian subjectivity, and finally has her first romantic relationship.

At the heart of *About a Girl* is an episode represented as the trigger to Anna’s serious guilt-related depression: on an errand with her younger sister, Molly, Anna ‘neglects for one moment to hold her hand’ and Molly is hit by a car. ‘It was all my fault. No-one told me that, but I knew’ (103). Molly goes on to make a full recovery, but Anna feels an ongoing sense of guilt about the accident. Previously, when Anna’s parents divorced, like many children of separating parents, she felt somehow to blame: ‘At first I took it all upon myself. It was all my fault’ (70). She is an outstanding student, starting her university degree at the age of sixteen, but her sense of guilt precludes her from enjoying her own life and finishing her degree. Anna even tells her lecturer that a particular essay needs to be re-marked, as it does not deserve its high mark. Fortunately, Anna’s state of mind is recognised, and she is successfully treated for clinical depression. With the passage of time, she no longer feels such intense guilt. Her sense of empathy means that she still cares about her family, but does not feel she has to solve everyone else’s difficulties. The narrative conclusion affirms Anna’s positive sense of self: free of guilt, anger and depression, she is able to re-connect with her peer group, be open with her family and resume her studies in a way that is meaningful to her.

**SURVIVOR GUILT**

The third and final pair of texts considered here depicts young adult protagonists’ sense of guilt which is close to ‘survivor guilt’. Again, the gay or lesbian character has not done anything wrong. Sometimes, they have not done anything at all.
He or she simply feels guilty for surviving where others have not, or there is a feeling of surviving at the expense of others. This is the case in Peter Cameron’s *Someday this pain will be useful to you*, which is mostly set in Manhattan in June 2003, and recounts protagonist James Sveck’s personal crisis, breakdown and recovery. His sense of alienation is partly caused by his gay subjectivity, which remains inactive throughout the novel, although he also feels fundamentally different from his peer group in other ways and is unable to relate to them. At the novel’s centre is James’ personal experience of the events of 9/11, which he viewed from his school classroom in Lower Manhattan. He also notices a brief newspaper article which details how one 9/11 victim was only missed by her manicurist. James empathises with and even identifies with her past loneliness, even though she is dead and no longer suffering. His general sense of guilt (he feels ‘as if I had done something criminal’ (122)) precludes him from enjoying life until he is able to process his experiences with the support of a psychiatrist.

In Emily Horner’s *A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend*, teen protagonist Cass feels a pervasive and persistent form of survivor guilt after her best friend Julia is killed in a car accident. Before her death, the two teens had been planning a road trip from Chicago to California, and Cass decides she will make the same journey, only on her own and by bicycle. The text is focalised in the first person and organised in two time frames. Each chapter is either ‘Now’ or ‘Then’ and the chapters alternate throughout the text. Those entitled ‘Then’ mostly focus on Cass’s literal journey of self-discovery as she attempts to cycle to California. Those entitled ‘Now’ centre on two school musical productions, with Cass slowly becoming aware of what she belatedly realises is romantic love for her dead best friend. Halfway through the narrative, Cass resumes school, but even after a break, she is still unable to move forward, ‘the last time we’d been under this tree being silly and happy and kind to each other, Julia had been there. The gaping hole of her gone-ness opened up all at once, and I couldn’t bear it. It was like a betrayal, to think that our lives could keep rolling on without her’ (134). She decides to assuage her sense of guilt by bringing Julia’s musical script to the stage, and that project becomes her all-consuming focus in the present.

Cass’s feelings of grief and guilt for surviving when her best friend is dead prevent her from living her own life. She feels anger towards Julia’s ex-boyfriend, and partly blames him for Julia’s death. She cannot put her dead best friend out of her mind, and obsessively collects small objects for her, which she keeps safe in a box. She also carries around Julia’s ashes, which finally she and her friends bury on a Californian beach. Cass’s slow recovery from her feelings of grief and guilt is linked to her friendship with Heather, a drama geek, who used to tease her in middle grade but who has since decided that she is in love with Cass. Heather writes poems, plays the clarinet and is a talented performer, taking the lead role in the musical Julia wrote and composed before she died, *Totally Sweet Ninja Death Squad*. But there are several obstacles to the girls’ relationship, mainly Cass’s feelings of guilt, which have to be resolved before the new relationship is able to develop. By the novel’s end, Cass has found a way to reconcile her feelings of guilt with her new feelings of love for Heather. The concluding chapters affirm
Cass’s talent at creating theatrical props, her creativity, her outstanding ability at maths, as well as her slowly emerging lesbian identity.

CONCLUSION

Emotional guilt dominates all the texts considered here. Individual characters, such as Bobby and Ellie, struggle to accept themselves and not feel guilt or self-loathing in the light of his or her emerging sexual identity. Others, such as Dade and Anna, suffer an enduring period of guilt-related depression, which blights the individual experience of adolescence and seriously jeopardises individual identity development. James and Cass experience a form of survivor guilt, which temporarily prevents them from getting on with their own lives. When they are able to process their guilt, they are finally free to move forward. Parental and peer-group support can make a crucial difference in the lives of gay and lesbian teens, but many gay and lesbian characters encounter social disapproval, prejudice and the fear of rejection and victimisation. Although this article has differentiated between guilt and shame, in practice both are textually associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and excessive concern and responsibility for others to the detriment of the individual gay or lesbian character. All these texts argue indirectly for increased social tolerance of diversity and difference. Collective guilt would function here to focus our attention on victims and their suffering: A transformation in social attitudes would generate increased acceptance and understanding, and a valorisation of the positive social contribution to be made by gay and lesbian teens. More positive and progressive social attitudes would help, in turn, to alleviate and resolve the young adult’s individual and damaging experience of guilt, leaving them free to pursue a more authentic life.

NOTES

2. Compared to their heterosexual peers, suicide rates are up to fourteen times higher among lesbian, gay and bisexual high school and college students (Science Daily, 2/2/2011).

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